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**Human Rights Without Frontiers**

**Police abuses in custody conditions:  
the case of Romanian yoga practitioners in the aftermath of widescale  
SWAT raids in 2023**

*An inquiry of Human Rights Without Frontiers (\*)*

**Table of contents**

Context: The 28 November 2023 widescale simultaneous police raids  
The conditions of the disproportionate SWAT operation  
The detention and interrogation conditions in police stations

- *Biased interrogations in police stations in inhumane detention conditions*
- *Detention conditions*
- *Failing assistance from lawyers and interpreters*
- *The fabrication of victims against their will at all costs*

Annex: Interview of one of the victims of police abuses in custody

**Context: The 28 November 2023 widescale simultaneous police raids**

On 28 November 2023, just after 6 a.m., a SWAT team of around 175 policemen wearing black masks, helmets, and bullet proof vests, simultaneously descended on eight separate houses and apartments in and around Paris but also in Nice. They were brandishing semi-automatic rifles, shouting, making very loud noises, crashing doors and putting everything upside down.

For comparison, in late August 2024, the French anti-terrorism prosecutor's office engaged about 200 police officers to hunt a suspect who had tried to set a [synagogue](#) ablaze in the southern French city of la Grande-Motte and caused an explosion wounding a police officer and destroying several cars nearby.

The November 2023 raids were not an operation against a terrorist or armed group or a drug cartel. It was an operation targeting eight private places mainly used by peaceful Romanian yoga practitioners.

Most of them had chosen to combine the pleasant with the useful in France: to practice yoga and meditation in villas or apartments kindly and freely put at their disposal by their owners or tenants who were mainly yoga practitioners connected with MISA yoga school in Romania and at the same time to enjoy picturesque natural or other environments.

The first objective of the operation was to arrest people involved in “trafficking in human beings”, “forcible confinement” and “abuse of vulnerability” in organized gang. The second objective was to save victims of these illegal activities but there were no such victims.

Result of the vast disproportionate operation: about 50 of the yoga practitioners who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time and had nothing to do with the search warrant justifying the operation were arrested, taken to various police stations and put in police custody for interrogation.

In Buthiers (Paris Region), one of the eight raided places, 20 people – 15 women and 5 men - were having a spiritual retreat at the time of the raid. They included engineers, designers, teachers, psychologists, a student in psychology, a philologist, a sociologist, a medical doctor, an actor, and so on. They had graduated from high schools, faculties of sociology, psychology, electronics, mathematics, IT science in Bucharest, Cluj Napoca, Chisinau (Moldova), Buenos Aires (Argentina)...

All women interrogated in the framework of the SWAT operation denied having been victims of trafficking and sexual abuse. None of them filed a complaint and after their release, all of them went back to Romania, quite traumatized.

Such yoga practitioners were victims of the police intervention as they were kept in custody in inhuman and humiliating conditions for two days and two nights, or more in some cases, for interrogations. *Human Rights Without Frontiers* interviewed about 20 victims of the [police raids and abuses](#), in particular in [Villiers-sur-Marne](#), [Buthiers](#) and [Vitry-sur-Seine](#).

The Romanian yoga practitioners were not treated with the same respect and humanity as for example Pavel Durov, the big boss of the famous social media Telegram, when he was arrested at the end of August 2024, getting off his private jet in Paris. After four days of police custody and interrogation, he was released on bail despite 12 serious charges - child pornography, complicity in all sorts of arms and drug trafficking for willfully failing to regulate Telegram according to the French law. The authorities put him under judicial control at the risk of letting him escape as the Lebanese businessman Carlos Ghosn managed to do while under house arrest in Japan awaiting trial in 2019 by concealing himself inside a large box which was shipped as freight on a private jet. Double standards.

“Depending on whether you are powerful or miserable, the court judgments will make you white or black...,” wrote the famous French writer La Fontaine in one of his numerous fables.

The testimonies collected by *Human Rights Without Frontiers* about the inhuman and humiliating conditions of the custody of the Romanian yoga practitioners detained and interrogated by the French police after the November 2023 raids were confirmed by Susan J.

Palmer, an Affiliate Professor in the Religions and Cultures Department at Concordia University in Montreal who is also directing the *Children on Sectarian Religions and State Control* project at McGill University.

She published her own findings after interviewing in Romania the yoga practitioners who had been arrested and kept in custody in France: [The Police Raids Against MISA in France: Conflicting Narratives](#) – [MISA Students Tell Their Stories](#) – [The Yogis' Complaints About The Police](#) – [The MIVILUDES Behind The Raids](#).

### **The conditions of the disproportionate SWAT operation**

The massive special police intervention forces expected to find criminals and victims, poor young Romanian women exploited as prostitutes and their so-called protectors.

It was in this state of mind that the heavily armed intervention brigades acted like lightning, by surprise and with destructive violence in the places to be searched as if they were to expect strong resistance, even armed, of gangsters. There was no resistance from the people staying there. The owners or co-owners or official tenants of the premises were not present at the time of the raid, except Sorin Turc, a violinist who played with the Monaco orchestra.

The police forces violently broke down the entrance doors and the various bedroom doors while the people present were proposing them to use their keys. They searched everything, made a mess everywhere, confiscated their personal computers, their cell phones and even their cash.

The Romanian yoga practitioners, mostly women, were wondering what was happening, who these aggressors were and what they wanted. The explanations from the police were very brief and were not necessarily understood.

One person had 1200 EUR confiscated. A couple driving from Romania were left without cash after police took all of their holiday money - EUR 4,500. No receipts were given to the dispossessed people that HRWF interviewed.

A Romanian woman who knew some French testified to HRWF that she had heard agents say after taking around EUR 10,000 in cash from several people that they had “enough”. A connection may perhaps be made with statements made in the press by some investigating authorities saying they “discovered” large sums of cash in several homes that were searched. No doubt it was then to give the impression that the accusation of money laundering was credible in this affair of national proportions.

During the searches in the targeted villas and apartments, the guests had to remain in night clothes or were often not given the privacy required to change. Others were gathered outside in the cold morning wearing only scanty clothing.

In face of the disorder and the damage caused by the search and the psychological violence of the police, the reaction of the retreating residents was stupor, psychological shock, fear and even terror, lasting and indelible trauma for some.

The first task of the police force was to identify and “release victims”. Their second task was to collect their testimonies in order to arrest their exploiters.

Amazement of the law enforcement: the sites targeted by the raids were not clandestine and financially exploited places of prostitution. No one among the yoga practitioners, neither woman nor man, declared themselves to be victims of anything or by anyone. However, it

mattered little to the police at this stage of the operation. The next phase would take place in the police stations after handcuffing the people to be transferred by bus.

### **The conditions of the interrogations in police stations**

#### ***Biased interrogations in police stations in inhumane detention conditions***

Considering that the allegations mentioned in the search warrant would lead to a trial, the presumption of innocence was never present in the minds of the police officers in the police stations. Their only goal was to extract incriminating testimonies concerning other people. To this end, they did not hesitate to take advantage of the situation of distress and vulnerability of the alleged victims from whom they wanted to extract incriminating declarations against other people and they threatened them to extend their police custody beyond the legal 48 hours, which actually happened in several cases.

The interviewees clearly told HRWF that they were put under pressure to say things that were not true so that their statements could match the contents of the warrant and make it possible to prosecute other people.

#### ***Detention conditions***

Furthermore, their conditions of detention were truly inhumane and humiliating. They practically had to beg the officers to be able to go to the toilet, even in urgent cases, and it was at their discretion. They also had to beg for a small glass of water and only got some food on the second day of their detention. Not enough mattresses and blankets in collective cells. Lack of hygiene. No heating in November. This was the treatment reserved for people transferred with handcuffs to police stations although there was no allegation of illegal activities against them and they only had to testify.

#### ***Failing assistance from lawyers and interpreters***

In many cases, the Romanian yoga practitioners were unable to count on the assistance of a lawyer during their interrogation. The reason given was that there had been too many arrests and not enough lawyers available. When they received the requested legal assistance, they wrongly believed, due to not having been correctly informed, that it was to defend them but in fact their mission was only to monitor the legality of their interrogation. Often, they had the clear impression that their counsels were more on the side of the police when they told them they were involved in a very serious criminal case, that their recourse to the right to silence would be interpreted negatively and could lead to prolonged custody or more.

The issue concerning the interpreters constitutes another weak point of the procedure. Many interviewees highlighted their incompetence and inability in accurately translating their responses to questions. The interpreters were also perceived as believing they were dealing with victims or criminals and as aligning themselves with the attitude of the police.

In addition, a number of yoga practitioners were not asked to check and sign the minutes of their interrogation; others were required to sign them although they were not translated to them or were just roughly and poorly translated verbally in Romanian. None of HRWF's interviewees received a copy of the document.

However, this phase of the procedure is of crucial importance. If the minutes and their translation contain errors that cannot be rectified, this can have dramatic implications in trials and lead to serious injustices.

In some cases, a few people with sufficient knowledge of the French language have had biased reports corrected but what about all the others?

Upon their release from police custody, the interrogated persons were thrown onto the street, often in the evening, without telephone and without money even though they naively expected an apology...

### ***The fabrication of victims against their will at all costs***

Indeed, a controversial theory in human trafficking cases is that such “victims” refuse to be considered as such because of their psychological vulnerability and their habituation to their state of subjection. Some even talk about brainwashing and Stockholm syndrome. Hence this need to “convince” them, including through psychological pressure, that they were victims even if they do not always realize it. This psychological-judicial drift which leads to the fabrication of false victims is spreading more and more in democratic states of Europe and America.

In Argentina, a very similar case, even in its details, to that in France ultimately resulted in the innocence of a yoga group, its octogenarian founder and its leaders. They had been accused, arrested and imprisoned for months for alleged human trafficking, abuse of weakness, sexual exploitation and money laundering.

The manufacturing of victims against their will which was inspired by a certain controversial branch of feminism, the abolitionists, was at the origin of that drift. These activists who campaign for a total ban on the commodification of sexual services consider that all prostitutes are de facto victims, even if they are free-lance and declare it is their choice. In Argentina, lawyers, psychologists and magistrates have begun to successfully fight against this very worrying phenomenon of victim fabrication which is spreading in other contexts than prostitution.

In short, this is the situation experienced by dozens of ordinary Romanian nationals who were neither actors nor victims of human trafficking or kidnapping, who had not been involved in money laundering or criminal organization.

On the other hand, they were the real “collateral” victims of excessive and disproportionate police action organized by the French judicial authorities. They had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

These Romanian victims remain traumatized by this experience and prefer to delete it from their memory. HRWF thanks those who despite everything had the courage to bring up these painful memories for the purposes of its investigation.

Back home, these people who were arrested in France and summoned in handcuffs to be questioned in police stations were no longer contacted by the French authorities. They believe that French justice will never spontaneously return the money and equipment that was stolen from them. They should be entitled to file a complaint as victims of French justice in order to recover their property but they prefer to forget this traumatic experience and turn the page.

This HRWF investigation highlights serious procedural flaws, illegal fabrication of victims for the purposes of prosecuting others, biased interrogation methods, inhumane treatment and serious dysfunctions of the judiciary and police in France in the context of police custody of citizens from other EU member states and beyond.

Two scholars have investigated the testimonies of the so-called victims of trafficking and sexual abuse by a criminal group: the Italian scholar [Massimo Introvigne](#) in his book *Sacred*

*Eroticism: Tantra and Eros in the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA)* (Milan and Udine: Mimesis International, 2022) and the late Swedish scholar [Liselotte Frisk](#) in her research the case of Finnish women claiming to have been victims. Both of them have confirmed the findings of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Ensure the right to liberty and security of person, and prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention (**Article 9 of the ICCPR**). Investigate the reported cases of disproportionate and violent police raids, and ensure that any deprivation of liberty is carried out in accordance with the law.
2. Guarantee the right to humane treatment and respect for the inherent dignity of persons deprived of their **liberty (Article 10 of the ICCPR)**. Address the reported inhumane and degrading detention conditions, including lack of access to basic necessities and sanitation.
3. Uphold the right to a fair trial and due process (**Article 14 of the ICCPR**). Ensure that all interrogations are conducted in the presence of competent and independent interpreters, and that detainees have access to effective legal counsel.
4. Prevent the fabrication of victims and the extraction of incriminating testimonies under duress (**Articles 7 and 14 of the ICCPR**). Investigate any allegations of coercion and ensure that statements are obtained voluntarily and without undue pressure.
5. Provide an effective remedy and reparation for victims of unlawful arrest, detention, and abuse (**Article 2 of the ICCPR**). Ensure that individuals who have suffered violations of their rights can seek and obtain compensation.
6. Strengthen safeguards against discrimination and ensure equal protection under the law, regardless of national origin or other status (Articles 2 and 26 of the ICCPR). Investigate any potential disparities in the treatment of individuals based on their nationality or association with the MISA yoga school.
7. Uphold the right to freedom of religion, thought, and conscience (**Article 18 of the ICCPR**). Ensure that any restrictions on the manifestation of religious beliefs are necessary and proportionate.

The implementation of these recommendations would help France to align its practices with its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and address the human rights concerns raised in the report.

## **ANNEX**

### **Interview of one of the victims of police abuses in custody**

Here is the interview of Ms A.D., who has been practicing yoga in various centers of the MISA yoga school in Romania for 16 years. She is a language teacher and translator who graduated from the University of Letters in Cluj-Napoca and also got a Master's degree in literary translation from the University of Bucharest.

**Q.: What motivated you to go from Romania to Paris Region for a spiritual retreat?**

**A.D.:** My previous enriching experiences in Vitry-sur-Seine. Sometimes I was travelling by car or by air from Romania but this time I flew from Denmark where I had spent some time in a yoga center. As usual I had not planned to stay for a specific period in France. It could be one month or more.

**Q.: How did you experience the massive police raid in November 2023?**

**A.D.:** The early morning of 28 November last was quite traumatic for the seven guests that were staying in the house: six women and one man. At 6:00 a.m., while we were all sleeping peacefully we were abruptly and shockingly awakened by a terrible banging noise I had never heard before, not even in movies. It was the brutal breaking of the front door. A flood of strange black men burst into the house, shouting "Police, police." I could not say how many there were but they were numerous. They were shouting "Don't be afraid. We are here to help you and to rescue you." I was wondering from what we needed to be rescued. We were not victims of anything and there was no fire.

After allegedly securizing the premises, the SWAT team withdrew, leaving a crowd of civilians in plainclothes who failed to identify themselves and tell us the nature of their presence there. As I was asking them pressing questions, one of them showed me a paper in French I could not understand and said their action came as a result of a rogatory commission. They started to interrogate each of us. I and some other yoga practitioners then began to protest loudly but peacefully. One of us, a woman, was handcuffed, which shocked all of us.

Finally, it was announced that we would be taken to the police station to know "who did what" and "what role we had in what". Our questions about changing clothes, going to the bathroom, having first breakfast, drinking or taking some water with us, and so on were met with impatience, irritation and even refusals. It was almost impossible to remove our night clothes in privacy and put on something more appropriate in this cold early morning of end November.

**Q.: How was the transfer to the police station?**

**A.D.:** During the trip to the police headquarters, I was in a state of fear, anxiety and even anguish. Eventually we arrived in front of a tall glass-fronted building with the words "Ministry of the Interior" at the entrance. We later found out that we were in Nanterre. One of the translators who assisted us afterwards explained to me that the location to which we had been brought was the highest level of a criminal investigation process. I felt that by this remark the interpreter wanted to intimidate me and make me understand our case was serious.

We were kept waiting in a standing position for a very long time before entering our cells. My legs were very sore. There were many other yoga practitioners who had been transferred from other raided places to the same police station.

**Q.: What were the detention conditions?**

**A.D.:** Although we were first considered victims, which we all strongly denied, we were put in detention for two days and two nights! There were four of us in the cell I was assigned to but there were only three beds. So, one of us had to put her mattress, which was thin, on the floor and sleep like that. One of the girls was very cold and we gave her our blankets.

The atmosphere in the cell was quite tense. There was an almost constant sense of fear and anxiety, insecurity and a certain heavy, gloomy hopelessness.

In the cell, when we needed to use the toilet or anything else, we had to stand in front of the camera through which we were watched there and to wave. Quite often, when we needed to go to the toilet, both I and the other girls in the cell kept waving at the camera but it would take a long time for someone to show up, which was a very embarrassing situation. Every time, a police officer was unpleasantly taking each of us to the bathroom, grumbling, swearing and slamming the door of the cell. When I later pointed this out to one of the policewomen during the interrogation I was told that there were a lot of people to be interrogated and that there was not enough staff. However, it was not my impression that they were overworked.

**Q.: What about the interrogations, the translation services and the lawyers?**

**A.D.:** During my two days of detention, I was interrogated twice. The first lawyer discouraged me from refusing to answer the questions, although it is my right to keep silent, because it is usually drug dealers and similar criminals who opt for such an attitude, he said. The second lawyer tried to intimidate me, saying the accusations against us were very serious.

Moreover, the translator assigned on the second day was totally incompetent. I cannot believe that he was a certified interpreter. He was Romanian and could understand what I was saying but his command of the French language was obviously insufficient. Several times, I turned to him and asked him pointedly how to say in French certain words I didn't know. He was unable to answer me. I have some knowledge of the French language, though limited, but I could see that his translations were much shorter than my declarations. I even made some big efforts to speak French to fill in the gaps of what he had not translated.

I could not understand why I had to spend two days and two nights, and maybe more if they decided for any stupid reason to prolong my custody. I was not a victim of anything and I had not committed any wrongdoing!

Otherwise, the questions in both interrogations were, for some of them, hallucinatory to me, absurd, insulting and irrelevant, including about my intimate, sexual amorous and love life. The interrogator obviously wanted me to say I had been sexually abused or raped in the framework of the so-called MISA centers in France.

At the end of my first hearing I was given a report of it in French of quite a number of pages to be signed. The interpreter was next to me but did not translate the document for me. Despite my limited understanding of French, I rapidly perused through it, which generated some reactions of dissatisfaction of the interrogator. However, I found several passages where there were inaccuracies as compared to what I had said. I pointed this out to them and asked them to correct it. They did it, but with some irritation. Given the circumstances, I could only wonder if there were not even more inaccuracies that I did not have enough time or knowledge of French to discover on the spot. I was not given a copy of the report and I find this whole procedure very questionable.

**Q.: Tell us about your release after the 48-hour custody**



**A.D.:** Shortly before 48 hours elapsed in custody, I was called and told that I was free and could leave. It was about 9 p.m. Outside it was already dark and very cold. Without any money or phone with me, what could I do? The police officers just shrugged their shoulders. Other yoga practitioners were also released almost at the same time and altogether we managed to find a solution to go back to our spiritual center in Vitry-sur-Seine, which had not been sealed(!), and get back what had not been confiscated. Fortunately, they had not found my computer and my phone and some money, but others were not so lucky. Jewels had disappeared. Their owners did not know if they had been confiscated by the police as they were never told about it and were not given a list of confiscated items.

In the days that followed this shocking experience, I had strong feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, confusion and lack of confidence in the future. I had the feeling that I was being watched. I was locking the doors with all the keys, pulling the curtains and covering every corner of the window. Sometimes the vision of breaking the front door and police brutally entering the house comes back to me and I'm afraid it will happen again. I have also experienced bouts of depression and a tendency to isolate myself emotionally. All these symptoms of post-traumatic stress have not yet disappeared, more than six months later.

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